

## **Coast to Coast...on the Road that Never Ends**

*A reflection on a rewarding year as Fulbright's Humphrey fellow*

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*"There are incalculable resources in the human spirit, once it has been set free."*

Hubert H. Humphrey

In a life-long journey, particularly when one is at a mid-career path, we often dream of some time for ourselves to reflect on experiences we have gained, to contemplate our future directions and to broaden our knowledge and network professionally. The Hubert H. Humphrey fellowship, a Fulbright exchange program, has given me a unique opportunity to do just that.

When I was asked to reflect on what the Humphrey year has meant to me, at first I felt it is almost impossible to capture it all in one short article; so many insights, unforgettable experiences and lessons learned from this eventful and memorable year in the United States. Before I started my Humphrey fellowship, many Humphrey alumni had told me that the Humphrey year was a turning point in their lives, because once the program had ended, they were fully ready for a new beginning. I never quite understood this until I completed the program, and I could not agree more.

For ten months, together with other fellows from seven countries, I was placed in a graduate study program at Cornell University, befitting my research interest on biodiversity conservation and climate change. At Cornell, I was overwhelmed by the numerous opportunities to gain more knowledge through taking rigorous courses, and attending many seminars organized by different faculty throughout the semesters. Since I intend to do an integrated study on climate change issues in Thailand, I immersed myself in the many aspects and different approaches to the topics ranging from marine ecology to geographic information system, from global climate model to international conservation. These were eye-opening experiences.

However, the learning hardly stopped there. I was given countless opportunities to make professional visits to discuss with renowned scientists and visit world-class research institutes of my interest in New York City, Washington D.C., Denver just to name a few. These were networking opportunities at their best. During study break, I took up a long journey across country to visit various National Parks from Atlantic Coast of New York to Florida to the Pacific Coast in California and ended the trip at President Obama's inauguration in D.C. It was memorable and I could not think of any country that has such diverse natural and cultural landscapes.

Exchange of knowledge and fostering a mutual understanding about issues of common concerns such as environmental conservation, globalization and social changes in the US and our home countries are a key aspect of being a Humphrey fellow. I gave lectures about biodiversity conservation at the University, advised graduate students who wish to pursue volunteer work in Thailand after their studies, and promoted Thai culture when opportunities arise and by interacting with people over home-cooked Thai dinner!

During the year, we were also required to attend a Global Leadership Forum that brought together all the 163 Humphrey Fellows from 90 different countries in the year 2008-09 to discuss global development, share ideas among each other and to learn more about Humphrey's legacy.

Hubert H. Humphrey (1911-1978), the late Senator and Vice President of the US, is a long-time advocate of international cooperation and understanding. President Jimmy Carter announced the creation of the Humphrey program in 1978 in honor of Humphrey's exemplary leadership, his tireless devotion to public service, and his sincere hope for greater understanding among nations. Since its establishment, more than 3,700 Fellows from over 140 countries have carried Humphrey's spirit throughout the world.

Toward the end of the program, I moved on from Cornell University in upstate New York to Hawaii to fulfill the requirement of a six-week professional affiliation, which I did with the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology. There I worked with marine biologists in the field to learn about coral research and climate change from a hands-on perspective. Hawaii is beautiful and, admittedly, I have never learned so much in six weeks. It simply was a great learning experience in paradise.

Now when I look back, the Fulbright's Humphrey program has really given me incalculable opportunities to learn through exploration and discovery. I have traveled deep and far. I have seen quite a bit of this great land, learned a great deal academically and professionally, and received the greatest gift of friendship.

It was an incredible year and sometimes it felt almost unreal. But I also know that all of this did not come by itself. You have to go for it. You have to make it happen.

The Humphrey year has already ended for me and indeed a new journey has also begun. I will never forget what I have learned and I will always remember one thing Hubert Humphrey often says "*everyone has to reach out and everyone can make a difference*".

The road ahead is still long but I am looking forward to reach out and hopefully I too can make a difference.